Imagine looking for a parking space in a crowded garage. There is only one entrance and one exit. Traffic comes to a halt when a car stops to wait for someone, who is not in sight, to pull out. The backup soon stretches into the street. After a couple of minutes, the offending driver turns off his engine.

Another driver gets out of her car, taps the blocker’s window, points to the row of cars behind him, and says, “Will you please move over so traffic will flow?” The offending driver shrugs his shoulders, dismissing the request. In frustration, the second driver begins to kick the blocker’s tires.

The irate driver’s intense response in this situation could be considered a loss of emotional control. Although adults sometimes are overwhelmed with emotions, most grownups have learned calming strategies to use to regain their control, such as taking deep breaths or slowly counting until calm returns. Emotional regulation is the individual effort to manage, inhibit, enhance, or modulate emotions (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999).

Developing Emotional Regulation

As children transition from infancy to toddlerhood, they accomplish major milestones in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains. While toddlers construct schemes (make sense of the world) cognitively through exploration, they also develop an awareness of self as separate from the surrounding environment. They begin to construct self-image by noticing their unique appearances, physical characteristics, and personality traits in the social and emotional domain.

Self-awareness is the foundation for emotional regulation. It is formed as young children begin to perceive themselves as autonomous beings who have the capacity to resist an impulse and display socially approved behavior (Berk, 2008). The emerging ability to organize behavior and emotions into patterns is a major challenge for toddlers and is also essential for higher-level thinking (Greenspan & Greenspan, 1989).

When his family came to pick up 20-month-old Connor from child care, he walked toward them. He also smiled with joy and reached up to them, saying, “Mommy, Daddy here.”

His parents picked him up, gave him big hugs, and a cheerful “Hey, Connor, we’re so glad to see you!”

Connor is demonstrating a complicated emotional and behavioral system by verbally announcing his parents’ arrival and making gestures that are accompanied with a

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cheery voice and a smile that expresses warm emotion. His parents approved of and reciprocated Connor’s feelings in a culturally relevant manner.

As this example illustrates, toddlers’ cognitive and emotional skills emerge simultaneously, so both are important for the development of their social skills. Emotional development can be seen as the application of mental processes to the feelings, interpersonal relationships, and objects to which the child is attached (Greenspan & Greenspan, 1989). For instance, a smile usually elicits a smile in response. Cuddling a soft, fuzzy bear may provide needed comfort in distress. While children can independently construct knowledge by interacting with the physical environment and applying mental processes, they learn to exhibit and label their feelings with the help of responsive, caring people (Charlesworth, 2008; Thompson, 1998).

Create a Blueprint for Emotional Regulation

Adults play an important role in children’s emotional development and emotional regulation. One key is the development of a trusting relationship and secure attachment (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008).

Attachment is the most complex and crucial emotional bond that develops between a child and caring adults during the early years. Children take their cues from caring adults’ complementary and responsive demeanors. These strong, affectionate bonds then become a secure base—an emotional scheme or set of expectations—that will ultimately create the blueprint for future relationships and social competency. Note how two caring adults set the stage for a smooth morning transition for Nikita.

Nikita arrives in the morning, holding her favorite blanket. She walks into the toddler room with her mom, Tamara. Niki holds the back of her mom’s pants as Carole, the teacher, and Tamara talk about Niki’s night and early morning. Mom picks up Niki, gives her a big kiss and a hug, and wishes her a good day.

Niki begins to whine when Tamara hands her to Carole. Niki does not resist, yet continues to whine. Carole softly assures Niki by saying “Mommy will be back after your nap and snack.”

Niki ignores Carole and begins to cry as her mother waves goodbye and walks out the door. Carole softly acknowledges her concern: “Nikita, I know you will miss your mommy, but she will be back.”

Carole chooses Niki’s favorite book. Niki looks at the book and says, “Read.” They settle into a rocking chair and Nikita begins to enjoy the one-on-one intimate time with Carole. They turn the pages together and look at details in the illustrations.

The trusting relationship between Nikita and her primary caregivers makes her morning transition a relatively smooth one. Carole acknowledges and validates Nikita’s feelings. This strategy will strengthen her affectionate bond with both the caregiver and her mother. Daily experiences like these become Nikita’s secure base for creating other relationships. Nikita is learning to expect that attachment figures will be available to provide support during times of stress. Internal models like these become blueprints for children’s personality development and guides for future relationships as well as their social competency (Thompson, 2000; Berk, 2008).

Of course, hereditary and environmental factors, such as a child’s temperament, family circumstances, parenting style, cultural traditions, the adults’ emotional health, and the child’s expectations also influence the quality of attachment. The primary caregivers’ involvement in

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every baby’s activities, ability to communicate with toddlers, and capability to read each child’s cues work together to determine the security of attachment. As time passes, young children build trust in their relationships, gain control of their emotions, and create a scheme for future management of emotional stress (Honig & Wittmer, 1990; Volling, McElwain, Nataro, & Herrera, 2002).

Adjust to Temperament for Goodness of Fit

The intensity of children’s emotional reactions is largely determined by their temperament—the traits children are born with and that are influenced by adult interactions. Adults who model the expression of emotions in acceptable ways within the families’ social and cultural context help children develop awareness of different emotions. This awareness makes it possible for toddlers to eventually identify and control their emotions themselves.

When adults recognize a child’s temperament and respond to those traits appropriately, this is known as goodness of fit. In order to create goodness of fit, adults work with each child’s temperamental style. Adults often make changes in the environment and their approach in order to meet children’s emotional needs.

Nikita’s morning arrival—with her mother’s wishes for a good day and the dialogue with Carole—exhibit a high degree of goodness of fit. In order to create goodness of fit, adults work with each child’s temperamental style. Adults often make changes in the environment and their approach in order to meet children’s emotional needs.

If adults have difficulty understanding and responding to children’s temperaments, then the goodness of fit is missing, and children’s development of self-regulation is made more difficult. When toddlers’ ranges of emotions become uninhibited and impulsive, adults can assist those children by recognizing, labeling, and understanding their feelings, being carefully observant and responsive to children’s emotional impulses (Martin & Berke, 2007).

Encourage Self-Calming Strategies

Although the role of adults is often pivotal in the co-construction of emotional regulation, children also develop their own self-calming strategies.

One midmorning in a toddler room, three children are at the table finishing breakfast with their caregiver, Lisa. Two toddlers, Travis and Elana, are playing dress up with hats and admiring their reflections in the mirror. The other teacher, Dawn, notices Carrie excitedly walk up to a window to watch a bird that perched on the fence. Alex is quietly looking at a book. Suddenly, a loud bang from outside interrupts the calm. Lisa and Dawn realize that trash is being picked up. Travis and Elana stop playing. Elana sits down, twirling her hair, while Travis heads to his cubby to get his lovie and plops himself into Dawn’s lap. The children at breakfast begin to whimper. Cory dives under the table with widened eyes in fear. Alex starts to suck his thumb.

Sonya, who was eating breakfast, begins to calm down when she hears Lisa’s acknowledging voice, “Yes, it was a loud noise and it scared you. The trash pick-up was really loud today.”

Then Lisa reaches down to Cory, assuring him, “Everything is all right. You are safe. Hold my hand.” After a minute, Lisa senses that Cory has calmed down. “You may go play when you are ready.” Cory looks out cautiously and begins to crawl from under the table.

Most infants appear to be born with the ability to calm themselves in times of stress, such as sucking thumbs or fingers, and carry these abilities into toddlerhood. Other self-calming behaviors are learned, such as twirling hair or holding a security object like a blanket or a teddy bear. When toddlers know that someone they trust is nearby—to offer reassurance, check in with them by glancing, give a little rub on the back, or to extend a hand or make physical contact—their feelings of security help them calm themselves.

As children get older, their feelings and self-calming devices progress from simple to complex, such as from thumb sucking to labeling and sharing feelings. Their responses mature due to the support of sensitive and responsive relationships with adults (Gonzales-Mena & Eyer, 2007).
How to Help Toddlers Gain Emotional Control and Social Competence

Toddler families and teachers have many authentic, daily opportunities to discuss children’s emotions with them, spontaneously, as they occur. Adults play a critical role in modeling appropriate responses, setting reasonable expectations, and in promoting children’s developing emotional self-control. These recommendations are ways adults can help infants and toddlers learn emotional control and gain social competence.

- **Spend time with individual children several times a day and adapt to their moods.** Personal attention helps children organize their emotions and behaviors. If Maria is in an active mood, put on a record and dance with her. If she is in a quieter, reflective mood simply holding her on a lap to watch other children at play may be an appropriate match. Gradually let children take the initiative to decide what they would like to do next.

- **Demonstrate emotional expression and regulation by reading books that contain emotional vocabulary and situations.** When reading children’s books, explicitly use facial expressions and voices relevant to each type of emotion depicted. Toddlers are rapidly developing their verbal abilities, so it is critical to model emotion words with expressions. Children will soon begin to use the label to express the same feelings as well as recognize and empathize with others’ feelings. Start with books such as *Lots of Feelings* (Rotner, 2003) or *Glad Monster, Sad Monster* (Miranda, 1997).

- **Show children how to regain emotional stability by offering closeness and security.** When children have calmed, then redirect them to a more pleasant activity. A sensitive teacher might hold the child’s hand while saying, “You want to ride a bike. All the bikes are busy right now. While you wait for someone to finish, would you like to play with the cars in the sandbox?”

- **Read children’s communication through their facial expressions and body language and then label the feeling.** Observant adults
might say, “Oh my, your lips are scrunched up like you are angry” or “Your fists are clenched. Come sit with me. Let’s talk about what is upsetting you.”

- **Observe closely.** Toddlers give abundant cues that tell adults when they feel frustrated or angry. Respond to individual differences during routines by involving children more actively in the experience and by talking them through it. Skilled teachers might say, “I understand that you are angry because your block tower was knocked down. You worked hard to make it so tall. Would you like me or another friend to help you build it again?”

- **Establish a predictable environment** that is responsive to children’s biological and temperamental attributes. As much as possible, keep the order of routines the same every day. A typical schedule might have outside playtime after morning snack, or smooth the transition from lunch to nap time with a daily story time.

- **Define, adhere to, and respect the limits set for toddlers.** Help children know and understand what behaviors are expected of them. If a child hits in order to get attention, clearly state a reminder about what to do instead, such as, “Hitting hurts. People do not like to be hurt. Please use words to tell me what you want.”

- **Recognize that children’s needs are important.** Show empathy and caring to help children develop self-calming strategies. “I’m so sorry that you are worried today. Your sister is in the hospital. Her doctors and nurses will help her get well. Shall we read a book about what happens in hospitals?”

- **Follow children’s lead in their play by admiring their initiatives.** Doing so helps develop children’s unique personalities and personal knowledge. A child who approaches the sand table might be asked, “What tools would you like to use in the sand? This shovel scoops up lots of sand to put in the bucket. It’s fun to pour out the sand into a big pile!”

Demonstrating responsive care and respect for individual children is critical to establish trusting relationships, which are the foundation for emotional learning and development of self-regulation. Responsive caregivers tune in to each child’s emotional cues and temperament. They help children to learn not only self-control but also to express their feelings in the social and cultural context that will progress into social competence.

**References**


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Emotional Regulation:
Developing Toddlers' Social Competence

Nur E. Tanyel

In order to develop toddlers' emotional competency, adults establish:

**Goodness of fit**
- understand temperamental and biological needs
- plan a predictable environment with daily routines
- set respectful limits and expectations
- read and respond to each child’s emotional cues
- provide physical closeness

**Clear communication**
- observe and learn to read children for emotional cues such as facial expressions and body language
- name children’s emotions when responding to their feelings and intentions
- read books with exaggerated facial expressions so toddlers can better understand their own emotions and empathize with others
- encourage children’s self-calming techniques

**Regular one-on-one time**
- spend individual time with each child every day
- acknowledge and respect children’s emotions
- empathize with children’s emotions
- adjust responses to each child’s mood
- follow children’s leads
- after calming, redirect children to more pleasant activities

**Recommended Picture Books About Emotions to Read With Toddlers**

- *Baby Faces* by M. Miller
- *Feelings Book* by T. Parr
- *Glad Monster, Sad Monster* by A. Miranda & E. Emberley
- *I Love You All Day Long* by Kevin Henkes
- *Knuffle Bunny* by M. Willelms
- *Lots of Feelings* by S. Rotner
- *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss
- *The Pigeon Has Feelings Too* by M. Willelms
- *The Story of My Feelings* by L. Berkner & C. Church

Subjects & Predicates

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.